

The Washington Post

Science and the suburban future

Sunday, March 28, 2010; A14

THERE IS a certain theoretical aspect to the pitched debate in Montgomery County over [plans for a Life Sciences Center \(LSC\)](#) that some backers predict will be the Washington area's answer to Silicon Valley.

Situated west of Interstate 270 near Gaithersburg, about 18 miles north of the District, the proposed agglomeration of office parks, research centers, academic facilities, shopping and housing is endorsed by the county Planning Commission and driven partly by Johns Hopkins University, a major landowner. In many respects, the LSC is the sort of project that most jurisdictions would love to have: It holds the promise of creating thousands of good jobs and of remaking the area into a magnet for educated people, cutting-edge firms, and federal and private research dollars.

It is an important and essential project -- but also, for the near future, mostly a notional one. That's why both the allure of the center and the virulent opposition look a little overblown, at least for now.

The area in question has been planned as a focal point for science and research for about 25 years. The question now before the County Council, which will take up the project next month, is whether to raise the ceiling on the substantial development already permitted and, if so, by how much.

What the planning commission has proposed would amount to about 20 million square feet of commercial development in the LSC's 1.5 square miles -- triple what's there now and 50 percent more than the existing limit. County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) would trim the proposed build-out limit by about 10 percent. Either way, say detractors, it's too much -- the equivalent of adding two or three new Pentagons' worth of office space to an area with neither a Metro station nor roads equipped to handle the 60,000 additional biotech, academic, office, health-care and retail workers who would commute in and out of the zone.

Technically, the criticism is correct; so are the predictions of maddening commutes. But the county, nearing 1 million people, is changing, and urbanization is inevitable. What critics mostly miss is that the development plan is highly staged, meaning that each new round of building is contingent on major improvements in infrastructure to mitigate the infusions of new workers and cars. The most important of these is the approval, funding and construction of the Corridor Cities Transitway, a 14-mile cross-county light rail or rapid bus line that would make stops through the LSC. This staged approach makes sense, although it presents daunting obstacles and a very long timeline. It's anyone's guess when, or if, the transitway will receive final approval as well as the \$1 billion or so in

state and federal funds needed for construction, let alone when Maryland will get around to improving local roads and building new intersections. It could be 30 years or more before the vision of a full-fledged LSC worthy of the name comes to pass.

But urban planning is by definition a long-term enterprise, and long-term visions are useful markers that define a community's idea of itself and telegraph what the future will look like and what resources will be required. In that sense, this project, while far off, is more than just another worthy goal. By setting its sights high, the county will help ensure the long-range prosperity of a region whose promise has too often been compromised by short-term thinking.